Building Vibrant Learning Communities:

Framework and Actions to Strengthen Community Adult Learning Councils and Community Literacy Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Strong Community Adult Learning Councils and community literacy programs play a critical role to the achievement of two outcomes of *A Learning Alberta* [1] - a focus on the learner and vibrant learning communities. A learner-focus means that learners are inspired and supported by learning organizations and communities, which in turn leads to an overall increase in educational attainment for all, including those from under-represented groups. Vibrant learning communities exist where learners are able to access a broad range of programs because of the strong collaboration between community learning providers and post-secondary institutions, along with schools, employers, public libraries and other organizations.

Because of the important role played by community learning providers, Premier Ed Stelmach asked the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology to increase support for community education and literacy programs.[2] The *Vibrant Learning Communities framework and action plan* responds to this priority by focusing on Community Adult Learning Councils and community literacy providers. This framework and action plan is a key component to addressing the alignment of these community providers with public post-secondary institutions, which was a priority in the *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta's Publicly Funded Advanced Education System* [3] and contributes to the *Roles and Mandates Framework's* outcomes of *communities engage in learning* and *Albertans have strong learning foundations*.

Community Adult Learning Councils and community literacy programs (also referred to as community learning providers) are supported by Alberta Advanced Education and Technology to:

- Improve the accessibility of adult learning, particularly for those from under-represented groups.
- Provide local opportunities for adults to acquire important foundation skills such as literacy and English language proficiency.
- Address nonformal learning needs in communities.[4]
- Mobilize volunteers and other community resources to support learning.
- Collaborate with other organizations to addressing individual and community issues through learning.[5]

Community Adult Learning Councils and other community providers of adult literacy and family literacy programming are primarily voluntary sector grassroots organizations independent from government with an accessible, local presence; local governance, input and leadership from community members; significant in-kind, volunteer and financial support from the local community; and efficient and sustained services and programming that address locally determined learning needs.

Vibrant Learning Communities framework and action plan aims to strengthen the ability of Community Adult Learning Councils and other community literacy providers to provide local programs and services, clarify their important role, and create greater alignment with the public post-secondary system, specifically, with Comprehensive Community Institutions. The *Roles and Mandates Framework* designates 11 colleges as Comprehensive Community Institutions which have a broader role in working with community learning providers in meeting literacy and foundational learning needs, and ensuring access to a broad spectrum of learning for a geographic service region.

Throughout this document, the terms ***literacy* and *literacy and other foundation skills*** are used interchangeably to refer to the range of foundation skills beyond speaking, reading and writing in the English language, that are required for individuals in Alberta to be active citizens, engage in further learning, communicate effectively, think critically and solve problems. These skills include the competencies to *identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, in a variety of contexts to achieve personal goals, develop knowledge and potential, and participate fully in society.*[6] From the international adult skills and literacy measures,[7] the minimum competencies are level 3 in reading and comprehending, completing mathematical computations and problem-solving – generally, the competencies associated with high school completion.

BUILDING VIBRANT LEARNING COMMUNITIES FRAMEWORK

The framework was developed from a review of the current system, an identification of priority issues and gaps, consultation with stakeholders, and input from the *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework* community adult learning group.

Vision

Quality of life is enhanced in communities where strong Community Adult Learning Councils and community literacy providers work collaboratively with post-secondary institutions so adults are able to engage in learning.

Outcomes

- Enhanced access and participation of adults in learning.
- Increased literacy and essential foundation skills of adults.
- Strengthened pathways and successful transitions for adult learners.
- Increased capacity and alignment of community learning providers with public post-secondary institutions.

Principles

Learner-centered: Alberta learners are at the core of vibrant learning communities where organizations, programs, and policies are configured to inspire individuals to value and participate successfully in learning.

All learning is valued: The development of knowledge, skills and attitudes throughout the life span in a variety of settings is valued for its benefits for citizenship, employment, personal development and physical well-being.

Accessible and enabling: Community learning providers inspire individuals to be learners, facilitate access, and support participation in learning life long and in a variety of settings including family, community, workplace, and formal settings.

Inclusive: All individuals are able to access and participate in learning regardless of their social, economic or educational status, age, ability, culture, life situation or geographic location.

Responsive and relevant to local needs: Community learning providers ensure that learning programs and services are responsive and relevant to the diverse and changing needs of residents.

Community-based: Learning is accessible locally through community learning providers which support individuals, families and communities to develop the knowledge and skills to find solutions to shared issues.

Accountable and outcomes-focused: Community learning providers are accountable to learners, communities and government for achieving identified outcomes through effective allocation of resources and sound governance, management and measurement practices.

Collaborative: Vibrant learning communities are created through collaboration among community learning providers, public post-secondary institutions and community partners, strong learning networks, and a coordinated approach that maximizes community resources to address learning needs.

OUTCOMES AND ACTIONS

A number of social and economic issues are driving the need to strengthen community learning and literacy programs. Among the issues are the significant numbers of working age Albertans with poor or weak foundations skills and/or without high school equivalency, and the need to close the gaps in education that exist for rural residents and other groups under-represented in learning. Although community learning providers offer accessible programs in non-threatening settings in over 80 Alberta communities, they are limited in their ability to address many of the identified needs because of mandate and resource constraints.

OUTCOME 1:

Enhanced access and participation of adults in learning. More adult Albertans, particularly those from under-represented groups, access and successfully participate in nonformal and formal learning throughout their life span.

Responding to diverse learner needs - In times of strong economic prosperity, many Albertans are not able to take advantage of full-time, class-room based learning opportunities. For many learners, including people with disabilities and those caring for children, part-time learning is likely to result in more successful learning outcomes. Increasing access to learning also means bringing learning to Albertans in communities and in the workplace in support of a "work and learn" approach.

It also means being more innovative to find ways to inspire and motivate "untapped" learners and assisting them with access to information, guidance, and other supports. This includes Alberta's Aboriginal populations and newcomers to Canada. Community learning providers already serve as a starting point into more formal learning for untapped learners and individuals from under-represented groups. However, there is the potential for these organizations to do this in more communities as well as to enable more Albertans to participate in learning through out the life span. This can only be realized with a strengthened mandate and increased resources.

Priority Actions

1.1 Strengthen the roles and mandates and fund community learning providers to enable them to encourage and engage more adults in foundational learning and serve as a gateway to programming in Comprehensive Community Institutions. This includes:

- Increasing outreach and awareness-raising activities to promote the value of lifelong learning and available learning opportunities.
- Providing information, advice and individualized learning support to individuals so that they can access and successfully participate in learning.
- Working collaboratively with Comprehensive Community Institutions to ensure foundational learning and high school equivalency courses and programs are available.
- Supporting learner transitions and pathways.
- Facilitating enhanced access to credit programming in partnership with Comprehensive Community Institutions.
- Providing access to computers, the internet and videoconferencing for the purposes of learning.

1.2 Explore ways to overcome the financial and non-financial barriers to adults participating in basic education and high school equivalency programs.

OUTCOME 2:

Increased literacy and essential foundation skills of adult Albertans. Increase the percentage of adult Albertans who attain high school equivalency and score level 3 or higher on international measures of adult skills.

Raising literacy levels and high school completion rates - Over one-third of working-aged Albertans have weak or poor literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills. Over 750,000 Albertans do not have minimum skill levels equivalent to high school completion, and are more likely to face challenges in living and working. Moreover, their schooling experiences are likely to make them reluctant to engage in formal learning. Low literacy skills are not limited to newcomers - approximately half of Albertans at the lowest literacy skills were born in Canada.

Approximately one-quarter of Alberta's youth do not complete high school within five years of entering Grade 10. Rural Albertans are almost twice as likely to not receive an education beyond grade 9 compared to those from Edmonton or Calgary. Although some youth return to learning later in life, many do not.

Responding to increasing numbers of new immigrants – Over the last two years, Alberta has welcomed over 40,000 new immigrants. The continued increase in the numbers of newcomers to urban and smaller communities across the province presents an opportunity and a challenge for community learning providers as demand for English language, literacy and immigrant-bridging programs rise.

Priority Actions

2.1 Implement a new Community Literacy and Language Program to be delivered by Community Adult Learning Councils and community literacy providers:

- To serve more learners in more communities
- To expand the range of delivery models
- To increase quality through adult and family literacy, and English language learning frameworks with delivery standards, curricula and resources, and professional development for instructors/ facilitators/mentors.
- To ensure accountability and to facilitate transitions for the learner to Comprehensive Community Institutions, through the development and implementation of standardized learner assessment of progress and program evaluation.

2.2 Partner with Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry to support activities to develop workplace partnerships to promote and facilitate opportunities for employed adults to take workplace training that incorporates workplace essential skills.

2.3 Work with other government departments, community learning providers and key stakeholders to increase literacy and other essential foundation skills through the development of a coordinating framework for literacy in Alberta.

2.4 Incorporate information on literacy and other foundational learning in the Alberta Access Plan and Comprehensive Community Institution Individual Access Plans.

OUTCOME 3:

Strengthened pathways and successful transitions for adult learners.

A priority direction in *The Roles and Mandates Policy Framework* included enhancing learning pathways. A key consideration is ensuring that learners are able to make transitions within and outside the system. Strategies need to be considered to enable recognition of prior learning, knowledge, competencies and experience; recognize international qualifications, transferability within the system, and movement from nonformal to formal learning. Community learning providers are well-placed to provide more learning services and supports to enable more successful learning in partnership with Comprehensive Community Institutions.

Priority Actions

3.1 In collaboration with community learning providers and Comprehensive Community Institutions, develop and implement initiatives that enable learners to "ladder" from nonformal learning to formal learning. Initiatives should include establishing literacy benchmarks to support the development of adult literacy certification that recognizes completion of literacy and other foundational training. Credentials should reflect quality standards and be recognized throughout the system.

3.2 Develop the capacity for community learning providers to assist learners in creating learning portfolios and other means of assisting adults to identify their skills, competencies and knowledge.

3.3 With community learning providers explore system-wide means of assessing/tracking learner progress, for example, exploring the feasibility of using the Alberta Student Number for learners in community-based adult learning and literacy programming.

OUTCOME 4:

Increased capacity and alignment of community learning providers with public post-secondary institutions.

The Roles and Mandates Policy Framework identified that Alberta's advanced education system was not well integrated with its community learning system, and that the system needs to improve the extent to which skills and knowledge gained through nonformal and informal learning is recognized by post-secondary institutions. To leverage the full potential of community learning providers, Comprehensive Community Institutions must work more closely with community learning providers in the development of the institution's individual access plan, and in meeting literacy and foundational learning and ensuring the full spectrum of learning opportunities is available in their geographic service region.

Community learning providers operate with small operating budgets and a heavy reliance on community volunteers for both governance and provision of services. Small operating budgets also limit their ability to hire full-time, permanent staff or provide competitive salaries. Resource challenges are exacerbated for organizations in rural and remote communities because of the small and shrinking pool of potential board members, staff and volunteers, and the high cost of providing services over great distances and with lower economies of scale. Although Alberta Advanced Education and Technology has increased base operating grants for Community Adult Learning Councils and volunteer tutor adult literacy programs, increases have been outpaced by rising costs for salaries, rent, utilities and technology.

Priority Actions

4.1 Work with Community Adult Learning Councils and Comprehensive Community Institutions to further develop the Community Adult Learning Centre model. Community Adult Learning Centres could be partnerships between Community Adult Learning Councils, Comprehensive Community Institutions and other organizations to provide a highly visible location in a community that provides a local point of access for learners to information and advice, learning supports and technology.

4.2 Synchronize planning and reporting cycles of community-based learning providers with Comprehensive Community Institutions. Community learning providers should work collaboratively with Comprehensive Community Institutions to ensure achievement of Business and Individual Access plans.

4.3 Consider ways to enable a shared understanding of community learning and post-secondary institutional issues between the boards of governors of Comprehensive Community Institutions and community learning provider boards of directors.

4.4 Ensure that representatives of community learning providers are involved in the Regional Access Advisory Councils of Comprehensive Community Institutions.

4.5 Develop province-wide mechanisms to identify, recognize and share effective practices in community learning, such as through a web portal, and annual or regional conferences.

4.6 To increase the community visibility and coordinate learner support services, work with other government departments to develop policies to facilitate the shared use of government buildings, schools and libraries.

NOTES:

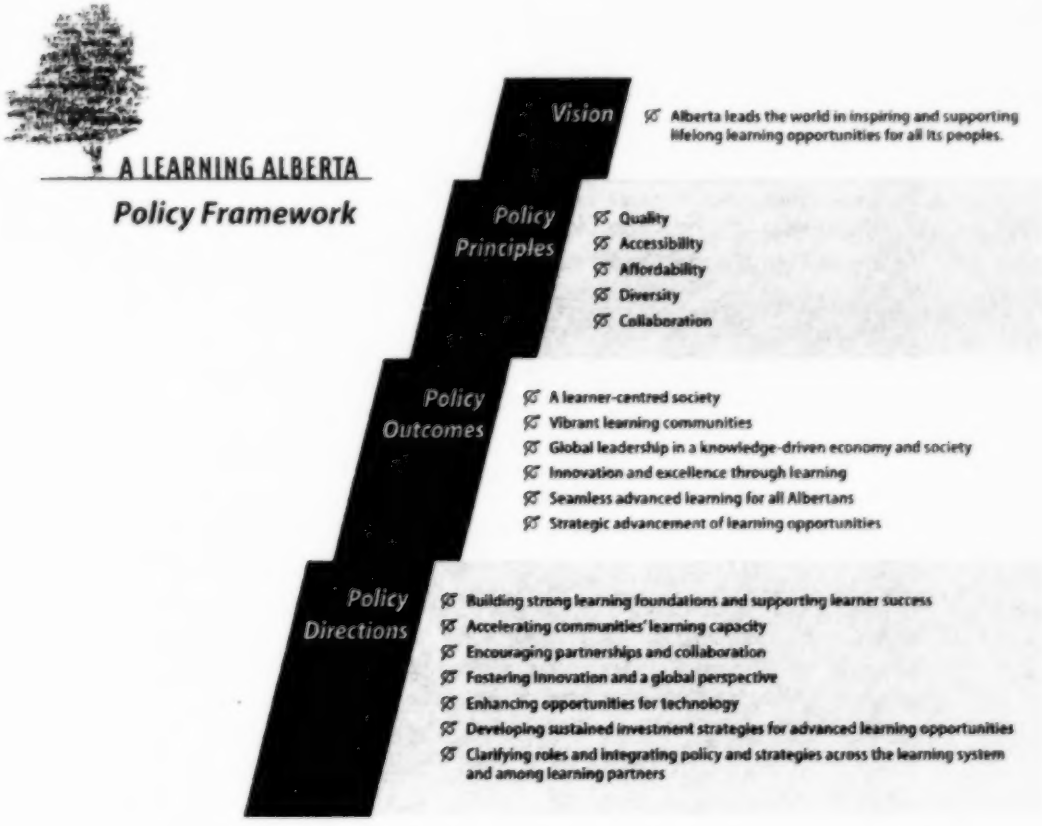
1. Alberta Advanced Education, *A Learning Alberta, Final Report of the Steering Committee* (May 2006). The framework is also included in Appendix 1, Policy Context, page 7.
2. December 15, 2006 mandate letter from the Premier of Alberta, the Honourable Ed Stelmach to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology.
3. Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta's Publicly Funded Advanced Education System* (November 2007). A summary of the framework is also included in Appendix 1, Policy Context, page 8.
4. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) uses the following definitions: Nonformal learning refers to structured and intentional learning that does not lead to a qualification or a certificate. Formal learning refers to learning through a program of instruction which is generally recognized in a qualification or a certificate. Informal learning refers to learning resulting from daily work-related, family or leisure activities.
5. Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, Community Adult Learning Program Policy. See also Appendix 2.
6. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition of literacy (2003).
7. Human Resources and Social Development Canada and Statistics Canada, *Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*, (2005) page 14.

APPENDIX 1 – POLICY CONTEXT

A Learning Alberta

The *Learning Alberta* review of Alberta's post-secondary education system culminated in a strategic policy framework to guide the system over the longer-term.

Vibrant Learning Communities was framed by the policy outcomes of a learner-centred society and vibrant learning communities, and the policy directions of building strong learning foundations and ensuring learner success; accelerating communities learning capacity; and encouraging partnerships and collaboration. It responds to the Steering Committee's recommendations to increase literacy levels of adult Albertans, to increase the participation in learning and educational attainment of under-represented learner populations, and to redefine the roles of community learning organizations to ensure strong community programming.


A LEARNING ALBERTA
Policy Framework
Vision
Alberta leads the world in inspiring and supporting lifelong learning opportunities for all its peoples.
Policy Principles
Quality
Accessibility
Affordability
Diversity
Collaboration
Policy Outcomes
A learner-centred society
Vibrant learning communities
Global leadership in a knowledge-driven economy and society
Innovation and excellence through learning
Seamless advanced learning for all Albertans
Strategic advancement of learning opportunities
Policy Directions
Building strong learning foundations and supporting learner success
Accelerating communities' learning capacity
Encouraging partnerships and collaboration
Fostering innovation and a global perspective
Enhancing opportunities for technology
Developing sustained investment strategies for advanced learning opportunities
Clarifying roles and integrating policy and strategies across the learning system and among learning partners

Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta's Publicly Funded Advanced Education System

The Government of Alberta approved the *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework* in November 2007 to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of Alberta's advanced education system partners. The *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework* outlines ten priority directions – one of which is the alignment of Comprehensive Community Institutions with community learning providers. The *Vibrant Learning Communities* document addresses this priority direction as well as contributes to the priority direction of *enhancing learning pathways*, and the system outcomes of *communities engage in learning* and *Albertans have strong learning foundations*.

Key to alignment of the community learning providers with post-secondary institutions is their relationship with Comprehensive Community Institutions – 11 colleges which have a broader role in working with community-based adult learning organizations in meeting literacy and foundational learning, and ensuring access to a broad spectrum of learning for a geographic service region.

Vision

Alberta's social, cultural, and economic well-being is enhanced through a globally recognized advanced education system that provides high-quality and efficient programs, is resilient and responsive to learner and economic needs, and unleashes innovation through world-class research and knowledge transfer.

The vision recognizes that an educated society is key to securing both economic prosperity and social well-being. It captures the importance of an advanced education system that is responsive to changes in the economy and society, as well as a driving force of innovation in a knowledge economy.

Principles

- Accountable
- Collaborative
- Global excellence and quality
- Responsive
- Seamless transitions
- Sustainable/effective use of resources

System Outcomes

- Alberta has a highly educated society
- Communities engage in learning
- Albertans have strong learning foundations
- The system values and builds on skills and knowledge
- Institutions foster regional economic development
- The system responds to economic and social needs
- Technology is leveraged to foster learning and research success
- Enhanced access to information supports system improvement
- Resources are effectively allocated
- The system fosters world class research and innovation

***Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce*, Alberta's ten year labour force strategy**

To respond to Alberta's growing labour force pressures; the Government of Alberta introduced *Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce* in September 2006 to guide government's investment in people and the labour market over the next ten years. This initiative recognizes that people are the shaping force in sustaining Alberta's economic performance and quality of life, and partnerships with a variety of stakeholders including industry and employers are imperative.

The initiative is about advancing the skill and education level, innovation, and responsiveness of individual Albertans to reach their full potential, developing a high performance workforce and workplaces, and expanding and diversifying our communities. Alberta will achieve these outcomes by focusing on four strategic themes that will inform Albertans, attract others from outside Alberta, develop Albertans and retain people in Alberta.

The strategic themes most relevant to the *Vibrant Learning Communities* framework are the *Develop* and *Retain* themes. The *Develop* theme is a commitment to provide Albertans with improved access to the education and training needed to address short-term labour market demands and long-term capacity needs to respond to future opportunities and challenges. The *Retain* theme is a commitment to enhance community and work attractiveness leading to more workers remaining engaged in Alberta's labour force. The focus is on retaining under-represented labour groups such as immigrants, First Nations, Métis and Inuit people, people with disabilities, mature workers and women by providing them the supports they need to maintain attachment to the labour force.

Vibrant Learning Communities also contributes to the following policies:

- Learning and skill development is one of the four pillars essential for sustainable growth in ***Alberta's Rural Development Strategy***.
- Alberta's immigration policy framework ***Supporting Immigrants and Immigration to Alberta*** included strategies to increase access to English language and literacy programming for immigrants in Alberta's smaller centres and rural areas.

APPENDIX 2 – COMMUNITY ADULT LEARNING COUNCILS AND COMMUNITY LITERACY PROGRAMS

Advanced Education and Technology through its Community Programs Branch supports over 80 Community Adult Learning Councils, over 70 volunteer tutor adult literacy programs, and over 50 family literacy programs in cities and rural communities across Alberta.

Community Adult Learning Councils
Community Adult Learning Councils are voluntary associations, either incorporated under the Societies Act or hosted by a legal entity, that are mandated by the ministry to provide nonformal, noncredit part-time adult learning in a specified geographic region. The program relies on community volunteers for governance on the local boards of directors, and for management committees and tutors if they also run a volunteer tutor adult literacy program. Councils provide learning opportunities in approximately 253 cities, towns and villages – 77% of these communities have a population size less than 3,000. Learning opportunities are also provided in hamlets, which are not included in this number.

Community Adult Learning Councils work in collaboration with community partners to identify and provide learning opportunities in areas of literacy, English as a Second Language (ESL), employability enhancement, and courses to address community identified priorities. In 2006/07, 68 of 83 Councils received a base grant of less than $40,000 to operate and provide programming in these areas. In 2005, Community Adult Learning Councils offered 400 adult basic literacy courses to 5,195 registrants, and 420 ESL courses to 4,444 registrants. The average length of programming was 56 hours of instruction with 58 courses ranging from 100 to 225 hours of instruction. In addition to these courses, Community Adult Learning Councils also provided workshops and other learning opportunities to enhance employability, address community identified needs, and respond to local demand for general interest programming.

Volunteer Tutor Adult Literacy Programs
Fifty-one Community Adult Learning Councils and 21 other organizations receive a separate grant to provide a volunteer tutor adult literacy service to recruit, train and match volunteers to assist adults who want to improve their English language, reading, writing or numeracy skills. These other organizations include public libraries, colleges, literacy organizations and two John Howard Societies. Annual grants provided to 54 of 72 organizations are $25,000 or less. Each year, about 2,000 adults are matched with volunteer tutors who collectively donate over 93,000 hours. Half of the learners in tutor programs are immigrants. The services are available in about 60 Alberta towns and cities.

Family Literacy Programs
Advanced Education and Technology also funds not-for-profit organizations a maximum of $40,000 a year to provide family literacy programming for disadvantaged adults with preschool children. Family literacy programs boost the confidence and literacy skills of parents so that they can effectively engage their young children in early language and learning activities. Eight Aboriginal organizations are also supported to provide family literacy programming in urban centres, rural communities and Metis Settlements. Each year, over 7,000 parents along with their preschool-aged children participate in part-time family literacy programming in approximately 118 urban and rural communities.

Volunteer tutor adult literacy programs and family literacy programs must be provided tuition-free. Family literacy, adult literacy and ESL programming provide opportunities for adults to gain foundation skills so that they can progress to other learning to meet their citizenship, further education or employment goals. Total funding provided by Advanced Education and Technology for community-based adult learning was $10 million in 2006/07.